



State Executive Orders: Nuance in restrictions, revealing suspensions, and decisions to enforce

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Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the Office of the Vice President for Research at Indiana University for providing funding for our incredible graduate research team.

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.1111/puar.13250

Practitioner Points:

- This provides practitioners with increasing transparency around how to understand the contents of state level executive orders
- It may help provide language to hold state governments accountable, particularly as local and state officials continue to adapt to the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Practitioners will benefit from the database discussion as it provides comparisons between states. This comparison should prove valuable as officials evaluate the response of their agencies as compared to what agencies in other states have done.

State Executive Orders: Nuance in restrictions, revealing suspensions, and decisions to enforce**Abstract:**

In the absence of a large-scale federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic, state and local elected officials have enacted executive orders that include both restrictions to public liberties as well as the suspension of rules and regulations. While these restrictive policy actions have received extensive media attention, the suspensions, including regulatory rollbacks, waivers, and extensions are lesser known. This viewpoint offers insight from a working database that captures the nuance and variation across restrictions, suspensions, and enforcement mechanisms being utilized, at the state level.

Already, there are public-facing dashboards, media reports, and articles that discuss and examine state-level executive orders (EOs), focused on activities such as school closures, restaurant closures, mass gathering bans, and travel bans (ASTHO 2020; CCHP 2020; KFF 2020; NCSL 2020). However, the actions taken by states are far more comprehensive and robust than these explorations imply. As will be laid out herein, EOs across the states contain both actions restricting individual liberties and the suspension of rules that guide administrative

Accepted Article

agency action (i.e. healthcare licensing, public hearing requirements, unemployment, teleworking, and access to services). They can and often do include very significant changes to long-standing policies on public meetings, eligibility for public benefits, electoral processes, and other critical democratic infrastructure.

This viewpoint provides two primary contributions: the first is a description of the database that has been compiled by the authors through inductive process-tracing, the second is an exploration of preliminary findings in executive orders and a deep dive into a case study that offers insight as to how the information may be useful to practitioners and researchers moving forward. The case studies are chosen for their representation of different response strategies taken by states; a number of states had centralized responses within the governor's office, while others leaned more formally on agency directors to adopt or suspend rules. We include a deeper discussion for a single case to demonstrate how this information may be useful in the future. Explicitly laying out the demographics, history of disaster, and active COVID-19 situations, which should be more formally explored in future research. The viewpoint is concluded by outlining a brief discussion of future directions that the pursuit of this work can offer scholars, practitioners, and citizens alike.

Capturing nuance in executive orders

Rationale. Most of the initial public-facing projects that have explored the effectiveness of social distancing guidelines and other orders have treated these measures as binary. For example, many projects treat stay-at-home orders identically, but they actually have wide variation within them, from their enactment of enforcement mechanisms to their designations of essential businesses. Other public-facing projects have also jumped, fairly quickly, to utilizing

various metrics including critical care capacity, positive tests, and deaths to predict the outcomes of social distancing interventions (IHME 2020; Matrajt and Leung 2020; Goodreau et al. 2020) prior to a real understanding of the variation present within these orders. In fact, each executive order has a wide degree of variation regarding how restrictions and closures will be carried out. This seems to be motivated, in part, by the cultural complexity and political context within each state.

Process. To capture the full range of variation in Executive Orders (EO), a detailed process tracing approach is necessary. In an effort to keep track of the policy actions occurring at the state level across the country, the project team has coded over 1000 EOs adopted and implemented between March 1 and April 11 by every U.S. state, and continues to track and code orders as they are released. These orders cover a wide range of style, format, tone, and substance, and there are degrees of nuance present within these orders regarding social distancing restrictions, a wide range of administrative rules and adjustments to regulations, and rules around enforcement. The coding was conducted inductively in an effort to process trace and capture fine-grained variation across state-level executive orders. Process tracing is utilized as a tool because it enhances understanding of the “unfolding of events or situations overtime” (Collier, 2011, pg. 824). The executive orders are treated as snapshots of a specific point in time that describe current conditions within their respective states, and the process notes how each of these documents offers a new step in the state’s response to the COVID-19 crisis. This process tracing approach offers the ability to “contribute to supporting or overturning alternative explanatory hypotheses” (Bennett 2010, pg. 208).

Coding. The coding process follows each state’s executive orders over time, identifying and building a series of variables that are reflective of the content of the executive orders. Instead

of simply assigning a binary attribute to a given variable, the coding team copies relevant language from the executive order to be coded into our database. Each restriction and suspension have vast degrees of variation that will need to be examined independently. One of the techniques utilized to do this is to employ elements of the Institutional Grammar Tool (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Siddiki et al. 2019), which offers insight into the stringency of the language utilized within the order.

As is known from existing data, there are a series of shared actions within the issued executive orders, including restaurant closures, business closures, school closures, and mass gathering bans. However, until now, there has been little work to differentiate the specific approaches and variations between states. Although existing data repositories currently provide evidence of the presence of these actions, this dataset captures differences in implementation, execution, and enforcement, among other characteristics. Following, some preliminary insights from the dataset are examined.

Definitions and preliminary insights

Restrictions reference the regulation of private party activities such as business operations and gatherings. From the coding of the 1000+ orders a series of variations across these restrictions that make binary treatment less informative than a more nuanced coding were identified. These restrictions included school closures, restaurant closures, and stay-at-home orders. To offer insight to the degree of variation, school closures included: year-long closures; allowances to be open for food distribution; mandates that technology be provided to students; open to essential workers as ‘daycare’; or allowing staff in the office. Restaurant closures varied by capacity restrictions; limits to delivery or take-out; requiring separate staff for money and

food; and making exceptions for specific forms of eateries like hospital cafeterias, airports, and others. Stay-at-home orders varied primarily by their essential activity definitions, including exempting churches or specific business establishments, and by their enforcement mechanisms.

Suspensions capture the temporary revoking or reducing of rules, both those governing public and private actions, that cannot be followed in accordance with social distancing guidelines. In coding for nuance in these executive orders, a substantial amount of changes within the executive orders that were not being popularized in public dashboards became apparent - specifically, suspensions of rules. Commonly adopted suspensions included waiving hours worked limits on trucking; changes to procurement regulations; rule suspensions covering protections for workers in the medical field (such as removing restrictions on PPE use); relaxing restrictions on qualifications for medical professionals; suspending rules around access to facilities like juvenile detention centers, nursing homes, jails, and other facilities; and suspending requirements for in-person public meetings by utilizing technology to shift online or through the posting of transcripts. Other significant suspensions that impacted democracy and governance included election delay, increasing vote-by-mail opportunities, and decreasing stringency on petition requirements.

Enforcements descriptions outline which actors have the authority to enforce and potentially prescribe enforcement actions regarding reporting and punishment. Having coded for restrictions and suspensions, it became clear that the variations were fairly large both over time, and across states. As the process tracing method is intended to capture variation over time, this coding process captured changes to executive orders that were re-issued. Notably, some states re-issued business closures, stay-at-home orders, or social distancing guidelines with embedded or updated enforcement language. This enforcement language typically targeted individuals,

businesses, and even local governments that are found to be out of compliance with the state executive orders. The violation of these rules was often considered a Class 2 misdemeanor with fines that range from \$50 to \$1,000 and potential jail time from two weeks to one year.

Specific Examples of Variation in Executive Order Directives

To provide some additional examples of the variation across state executive orders Montana, Ohio, and Florida are used to describe different approaches and offer three examples of how language, despite similar directives, varies by state. Table 1 offers insight into the issuing office and order type by state. The variation here suggests that states appear to take different response strategies. Montana has a very clear governor-led approach, where all actions are executed through the purview of the Governor's office. Ohio tends to have a more balanced approach, where the Governor and appointed officials at the state administrative level are enacting orders to address COVID-19. Florida applies a third approach, where the agency directors appear to be primarily responsible for agency suspensions and the governor's office primarily responsible for restrictions.

[Table 1 here]

Table 2 explores the interstate variation in restrictions, suspensions, and enforcements, including excerpts of the language within the executive order that addresses the specific category. To facilitate future quantitative analysis this might be translated to a binary operationalization, but it is also clear that the particular language and directives are more informative than a binary indicator will allow. For example, there is decent variation in stringency and specificity of the orders, with some providing detailed references to state statutes dictating authorization and enforcement power and others utilizing more ambiguous language.

Florida forcibly closes bars, while Montana and Ohio both authorize some type of carry-out alcohol sales, with Montana explicitly encouraging social distancing mechanisms to be employed. Florida explicitly limits public hearing attendance, Montana offers local government's discretion as to operating hours and procedures, and Ohio does not address public meetings at all. Florida and Ohio both allow state and local law officers the ability to enforce the stay-at-home order, while Montana authorizes the local health departments to enforce the stay-at-home order. The variation present across these examples offer just some examples as to why binary coding does not capture the degree of variation present in executive orders, and the utility of developing this proprietary dataset.

[Table 2 here]

Montana¹

Montana offers a case where only the governor has issued suspensions and restrictions. Below, two figures are provided that detail the timeline of restrictions and suspensions present within Montana executive orders. This timeline is mapped against data that has been utilized frequently as dependent variables in the initial proliferation of COVID-19 research - recreational and retail mobility (Wellenius et al. 2020; Luther 2020; Kumar and Nataraj 2020) and positive case counts (Abouk and Heydari 2020). Then, a brief description of Montana as a state is included, highlighting a series of potential factors that will likely be important in understanding and unpacking state level responses to COVID-19 in the future. These include political climate (Hahn et al. 2020; Burkle and Hanfling 2015; Bui and Sankaran 2006), state demographics (Laurencin and McClinton 2020), disaster and emergency response history (Kapucu and Van Wart 2006), as well as COVID-19 case severity. Future work should consider questions of

causation, but this preliminary case is meant to offer some insight as to the proliferation of restrictions and suspension. Linking this information to mobility, as tracked by Google, as well as the number of COVID-19 cases on each date as per Unacast data (Google 2020; Unacast 2020) is meant primarily to prompt thinking around future investigation, and not to imply any causal evidence. It is also important to note that it has been widely reported that these numbers may not be completely accurate and should be taken as evidence of trends rather than exact calculations (Shinkman 2020; Lachmann 2020).

Montana did not declare a state of emergency until March 11th, which is later than the majority of other states. However, from that point, the state moved swiftly and within four days had closed schools, and placed a strong recommendation to cancel large gatherings. Restaurants were closed by March 20th (nine days after declaring a state of emergency), and a stay-at-home order was in place by March 26th. The first suspension was adopted on March 15th and lifted transportation restrictions on medical supplies, followed in quick succession by suspensions of rules around unemployment, medical insurance for COVID-19 treatment, and allowances for telemedicine services. Following, many of the issues addressed at a state level related to democratic concerns and social service provisions. More detail is offered in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below.

[Figure 1.1 here]

[Figure 1.2 here]

Political Representation. The current governor of Montana is Steve Bullock, a term-limited Democrat who is running for Senate in 2020. The bicameral state legislature features a Republican-held Senate (30-20) and House (58-42). Montana's sole House member, Greg Gianforte is a Republican, and Montana is represented in the United States Senate by Jon Tester (D) and Steve Daines (R).

Economy & Population. Montana is nearly 90% White, with 30% of individuals having a bachelor's degree or higher, 13% living at or below the poverty line, and only 6.8 individuals per square mile on average. The economy of Montana is robust and diversified, with health care, trade and leisure activities making up nearly 45% of the workforce. Finally, it should be noted that despite the rural character and lack of population density, more than 18% of Montanans are employed by state and local government.

Emergency Response. Montana Disaster and Emergency Services (MT - DES) is the lead emergency management agency for the state. MT-DES is part of an unusual arrangement that puts the agency under the auspices of the Department of Military Affairs, which includes the office of the adjutant general (*de facto* commander of the Montana National Guard) and the office of Veterans Affairs. The primary responsibilities of these agencies, as pertaining to emergency management in the state, revolve around wildfires, cold weather emergencies, and rural search and rescue.

COVID-19. The first COVID-19 case in Montana was reported on or about March 11, reaching 332 reported cases by April 11. Figures 1 and 2 lay out a concise timeline of the executive orders and directives issued in Montana between March 1 and April 11.²

Future Directions

Causality is important to understanding what is and is not working in response to the global pandemic. This research suggests that while current research is important, more nuance may be necessary in understanding the responses of state governments to the ongoing crisis. This section outlines a few directions for studying restrictions, suspensions, and enforcement as we move into the next phase of pandemic response.

Restrictions. The first call for future action is to develop a stringency indicator for social distancing restrictions, particularly as governments begin to rollback specific measures. This means moving beyond the traditional binary operationalization of restrictions. The second call for future research on restrictions is to understand the implications of state's restricting local government actions through preemption. There has been substantial tension and variation in how states have authorized power to local governments; some states have deemed local action that is more stringent than the state to be unconstitutional, other states have preempted local actions, while other states have offered local governments the flexibility to more, but not less.

Suspensions. It is apparent that there are large proportions of orders being issued that do not fit into traditional restrictions and are more likely suspensions of existing rules that hinder response to the pandemic. The first call for future research is to examine how these rule changes impact administrative agencies and democratic function. It will be important to understand the impacts of these changes on equitable access to government, transparency, and accountability. In addition, the suspensions of rules that prohibited telework may have large scale implications on the administrative agencies scope of work in the future.

Enforcement. Additionally, states have adopted varying degrees of stringency related to enforcement; these can, but do not always, incorporate descriptions of who is authorized to

enforce the EO, describe the potential punishments, and issue clear directives as to what will be enforced. The implications of whether enforcement is effective at increasing social distancing remains to be seen and should be explored in future research.

Summary

After conducting an inductive process tracing of over 1000+ executive orders issued since February 2020, there are three key takeaways to be made: first, it is apparent that, in many states, some actors outside of the governor's office are being given substantial discretion and/or power to make policy; second, the COVID-19 response toolkit consists of more than social distancing restrictions, incorporating rule suspensions and varied enforcement mechanisms; and third, the nuance present within these actions is not captured through simple binary operationalization. This viewpoint offers insight into a comprehensive database being established around restrictions, suspensions, and enforcement, provides a series of interesting takeaways from the database development, and offers potential future research directions for scholars. The process of how these orders are adopted and repealed, the political and administrative actors involved, and what policy arenas are regulated or freed from regulation are important considerations for what happens next. This does not assume positive or negative changes as a result of these orders, but it is wise to be aware and wary.

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Table 1: Issuing Office and Order Type by State				
	Governor's Restrictions	Governor's Suspensions	Agency Restrictions	Agency Suspensions
Florida	15	8	6	20
Montana	8	18	0	0
Ohio	2	10	13	2

Table 2: Examples of variation in common orders			
Directives	Florida	Montana	Ohio
Restriction: Alcohol Sales	<p>Title: State of Florida Office of the Governor Executive Order Number 20-68: Emergency Management - COVID-19</p> <p>Date: March 17, 2020</p> <p>“Pursuant to sections 252.36(5)(g)-(h), Florida Statutes, any licensee authorized to sell alcoholic beverages for consumption on premises that derive more than 50% of its gross revenue from the sale of alcoholic beverages shall suspend all sale of alcoholic beverages for thirty days from the date of this order, effective at 5 p.m. today, March 17, 2020.”</p>	<p>Title: Office of the Governor State of Montana: Directive Implementing Executive Orders 2-2020 and 3- 2020 and providing for measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 via food and beverage services or casinos.</p> <p>Date: March 20, 2020</p> <p>“The places subject to this Directive are permitted and encouraged to offer food and beverage using delivery service, window service, walk-up service, drive-through service, or drive-up service, and to use precautions ..., including social distancing.”</p>	<p>Title: Director’s Order: Order Limiting the Sale of Food and Beverages, Liquor, Beer and Wine to Carry-out and Delivery Only</p> <p>Date: March 15, 2020</p> <p>“Liquor, beer and wine sales in the State of Ohio are restricted to carry-out sales and delivery only. to the extent permitted by law. No onsite consumption is permitted.”</p>
Suspension:	Title: State of Florida	Title: Office of the	<i>No explicit orders</i>

Public meeting Rules	<p>Office of the Governor Executive Order Number 20-69: Emergency Management- COVID-19 - Local Government Public Meetings</p> <p>Date: March 20, 2020</p> <p>“Section 1. I hereby suspend any Florida Statute that requires a quorum to be present in person or requires a local government body to meet at a specific public place. Section 2. Local government bodies may utilize communications media technology, such as telephonic and video conferencing, as provided in section 120.54(5)(b)2., Florida Statutes.”</p>	<p>Governor State of Montana: Directive Implementing Executive Orders 2-2020 and 3-2020 providing measures for the operation of local government</p> <p>Date: March 24, 2020</p> <p>“Local governments may modify the hours that their offices are open for the transaction of business. Strict compliance with § 7-4-2211, MCA, § 3-6-106, MCA, §7-4-102, MCA, and other related statutes governing the business hours of local governments in Montana are suspended during the emergency, but only to the extent necessary to respond to the emergency and to protect public health and safety.”</p>	<p><i>referencing the suspension of public meeting rules</i></p>
Enforcement: Stay at Home	<p>Title: State of Florida Office of the Governor Executive Order Number 20-82: Emergency Management - COVID-19 - Isolation of Individuals Traveling to Florida</p> <p>Date: March 24, 2020</p> <p>“Failure to follow Section 1 of this Order is a second-degree misdemeanor pursuant to section 252.50, Florida Statutes, and is punishable</p>	<p>Title: Office of the Governor State of Montana: Directive Implementing Executive Orders 2-2020 and 3-2020 providing measures to stay at home and designating certain essential functions</p> <p>Date: March 26, 2020</p> <p>“This Directive, along with any prior Directive that implements and references the public</p>	<p>Title: Director’s Stay At Home Order</p> <p>Date: March 22, 2020</p> <p>“This Order may be enforced by State and local law enforcement to the extent set forth</p>

	<p>by imprisonment not to exceed 60 days, a fine not to exceed \$500, or both. Section 3.</p> <p>A. Pursuant to section 252.47, Florida Statutes, I hereby direct all state, county and local law enforcement authorities to enforce this Order. Any law enforcement authority that interacts with a person in violation...shall immediately report the individual...to the Florida Department of Health.”</p>	<p>health authorities of the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) provided in Title 50, constitutes a “public health . . . order[]” within the meaning of § 50-1-103(2), MCA, and is enforceable by the Attorney General, DPHHS, a county attorney, or other local authorities under the direction of a county attorney.”</p>	<p>in Ohio law. To the extent any public official enforcing this Order has questions regarding what services are prohibited under this Order, the Director of Health hereby delegates to local health departments the authority to answer questions in writing and consistent with this Order.”</p>
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Fig. 1: Montana Restrictions

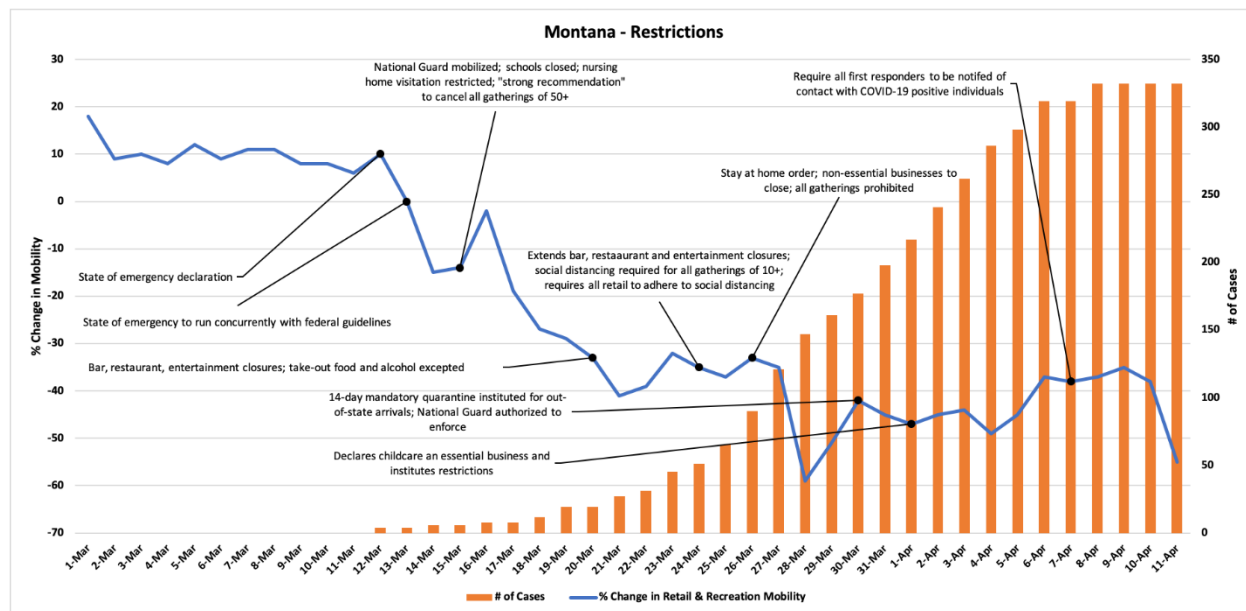


Fig. 2: Montana Suspensions

